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ABSTRACT

Compiled from papers written by project linkers after they spent two and one-half years working with schools, this report describes the Northwest Reading Consortium, a program linking schools in Washington, Idaho, Alaska, and Oregon with research and development (R&D) resources for improving reading instruction. The function of the linking agents was to help schools identify needs for improvement and select new programs. The report describes linkers' experiences using the R&D knowledge base, and helping schools identify problem areas, select appropriate R&D programs, and plan program implementation. The appendix includes a chart depicting the basic instructional planning process, and a five-page description of how the project developed and used a knowledge base of information about R&D based reading programs. (Author/JM)

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PREFACE

As educators, we are constantly challenged to meet the ever changing and diverse learning needs of our students in terms of both the quantity and quality of information they receive. In response, many school staffs have become highly resourceful and thus active knowledge seekers of information. Traditionally, most teachers have restricted themselves to well established routes, such as commercial publications. There exists, however, a multitude of other sources of information about which the average teacher knows little or nothing. Most of these alternate sources are ready and willing to assist the teacher with his/her information needs but like the wallflower at the dance, they need to be asked.

When a teacher does desire to access a new source of information, they are immediately faced with a predicament. Few have the time or management skills to search and implement solutions effectively. As a result, the frustrated teacher returns to more traditional methods of seeking solutions to his/her needs.

If schools are to reap the benefits of federal and state knowledge bases then someone has to assist the local school to use them effectively. It is in this context that we introduce the concept of the linker as the educational medium between information bases and the classroom. Linkers need to be skilled in helping schools make more and better use of instructional resources, whether those resources be people, processes or products. The concept sounds simple, but our research has shown that helping schools in this regard is no bed of roses. This paper is intended to outline the issues involved and to provide insights resulting from our attempts to cope with them.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

VIA LINKERS AND LINKAGE SYSTEMS

The Northwest Reading Consortium was originally formed by the state R_2R directors from Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington for the purpose of developing a reading improvement project proposal to be submitted to the National Institute of Education. The Project was funded and operationalized in July, 1976 as the Northwest Reading Consortium Research and Development Utilization Project (NRC-RDUP) with the Washington State Department of Education (Olympia) as prime contractor.

The goal of the NRC has been the improvement of reading instruction at local schools via linkage with research and development outcomes. A linking agent (linker) is housed in an intermediate education agency or its equivalent in each of the four states; each linker works with seven to twelve schools. Central office staff includes the director, an evaluator and office support staff in Olympia; a subcontract with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory provides support services to the project including technical assistance, consultants and a knowledge base of validated reading programs and research synthesis. Tailored consultation and training has been provided the linkers by the Dissemination Training Program at NWREL. (See Butman and Lohman, Guidelines for Developing Tailored Professional Development Experiences for Linking Agents, July 1978, NWREL.)

This Project, in its original design, was to interface with each state's R_2R program. The State R_2R Planning and Assessment Handbook has provided the basic model of decision making used by linkers with sites seeking to improve

instruction in reading. Major steps in this model included:

- Establishing a local action team (Task Force)
- Needs assessment
- Selection of solution
- Implementation

One intent of the developers of the NRC (the four state R_2R directors) was the further elucidation of this model; as linkers have worked with sites, their experiences have led to expansion and refinement of the model.

It is the purpose of this paper to delineate learnings related to 1) expansion and uses of the R_2R decision making model, 2) the role of an outside change agent (linker) and 3) schools and their use of R&D outcomes. This report has been written from the perspective of the NRC linkers and other Project staff and represents a Project position paper.

THE CONTEXT IN WHICH LINKAGE FUNCTIONS OCCUR

Schools as Social Institutions

As social institutions, schools are under pressures to respond to changes taking place in society. These pressures are generated administratively through legislative processes and informally through local action groups. At the same time, growth of understanding about the educational process places schools under professional pressure to maintain an acceptable level of excellence in the quality of their instructional programs through utilization of relevant research and development outcomes. Therefore, an assessment of the conditions as they exist at a site over time is a crucial aspect in the successful establishment of the linkage system in support of instructional improvement.

As Lippitt, Watson and Westley comment in the Dynamics of Planned Change:

> To change a subsystem or any part of a subsystem, relevant aspects of the environment must also be changed. The place to begin change is wherever stress and strain exist. Stress may give rise to dissatisfaction with the status quo and thus become a motivating factor for change in the system.

A linker can play a major role in assisting schools in 1) tapping information and human resources needed for optimizing change efforts, 2) conducting problem solving activities to explore alternatives to instructional problems and implementing decisions regarding them and 3) developing a capacity to carry out change processes needed to continue to cope in a changing world.

School and District Setting and Structure

The examination of specific pressures for change impacting on a particular site is an area deserving the attention of the linker. The expectations of the community, the pressures for change brought about by new state requirements or by in-district planning cycles, the goals of the principal and the teaching

staff need to be assessed and incongruencies or conflicts which may impact on the decision making process identified. The assumptions and expectations of the staff around change efforts in general, and the linker as a change agent in particular, should also be identified and clarity of purpose established between all parties.

While examining the current school climate is crucial for effective change, an historical perspective may also assist the linker in recognizing the roots of the immediate situation. The history of past innovative efforts, school/community relations, financial constraints and so on may explain variables affecting the current change effort.

The setting and environment of a school should be analyzed by the linker. While most schools sense a need to change, the characteristics and related problems of urban and rural schools differ. Distance from large metropolitan areas—where innovations usually originate and spread—will affect a school's understanding of educational trends.

In the NRC model, the linker is an outside change agent intervening within an already established social system. Staff relations, formal and informal patterns of communication, formal and actual power structures must be analyzed if the linker is to succeed in working within the system. Decision making strategies which are operating—and the limitations of these—need to be determined and utilized. The impact of budget, union contractual agreements and district planning objectives must be considered, as must the school's traditional relationship with outside resource or support systems. Clarification of these essential issues, and resolutions of conflicts, allows the linker and the staff to share common expectations and understandings of the strategies for change.

Staff attitudes toward program change should be assessed and the level

of the school in its ability to innovate, exhibit initiative and encourage creative activity identified.

Key questions related to setting include:

1. What are the community's expectations of the school and by what means are they expressed?
2. How does the staff feel about accountability measures?
3. To whom is the local site accountable for what?
4. What assumptions and expectations does the staff have about change efforts in general and the linker as a change agent in particular?
5. Is there clarity of purpose between all parties?
6. What other pressures for change exist such as new state requirements or in-district planning cycles?
7. What specifically does the principal hope to change in the school?
8. Is the principal's perception of the need for change shared by others?

Key questions related to structure include:

1. What are the formal and informal communication patterns in and between teachers and administration and are these patterns effective?
2. Is there evidence of mutual trust and support?
3. What is the style and purpose of the decision making group in the school?
4. What is the building administrator's style and level of skill?
5. Is authority in the district centralized or decentralized?
6. Are designated contact people in the central office also the key decision makers?

7. How is the budget determined and by whom?
8. What limitations does the budget place on program planning efforts?
9. What union contractual arrangements or planning objectives may affect the change effort?
10. How much ownership or commitment to developing outcomes can the linker expect of the staff?

A site's traditional relationship with outside support systems is another area of concern for a linker.

1. What is the prevailing attitude within the district toward use of federal dollars?
2. Have federal projects influenced the district or is there concern about losing autonomy?
3. What other federal grants are currently in operation? Have any been institutionalized?
4. What event or processes led to the district's involvement in the linker's project?

In assessing staff attitudes toward program change, key questions include:

1. What is the textbook adoption procedure?
2. Is the staff interested in finding curriculum models already in existance or do they prefer to develop their own?
3. How is research viewed by the staff?
4. What role does the site see higher education playing in inservice?
5. What incentives need to be built into staff development workshops?

Readiness for Change

It appears that all of the preceding factors play a part in a site's readiness for change.

Major determinants for change have been observed during the experiences of the Northwest Reading Consortium. The educational philosophy of the school and of the district have been found to be influential factors. Tensions existing in the district and site are also significant. Community pressure, fiscal concerns, state department regulations and requirements, superintendent or school board dictates all influence the degree of tension at both the school and district levels. At the site, interdepartmental conflicts, the frustration tolerance of the staff and their satisfaction with the status quo and congruence with district philosophy and direction all impact on readiness for change efforts.

The overall climate for change per se—availability of human and material resources, reasons for change, provision of opportunity for change, knowledge and background data sufficient to make decisions concerning viable alternatives, the availability of an innovation that meets identified needs and goals, an organizational environment which supports the change process, commitment to planning, time to plan and implement an innovation—must be at a reasonable level of readiness.

We have found that a linker needs an awareness of levels of readiness which exist in the school, the district and the community. Some evidence exists that this readiness can be divided into three levels:

1. Schools whose primary needs are related to information exchange
2. Schools needing assistance in facilitating group problem solving
3. Schools needing help with organization or communication problems as a precursor of effective group problem solving or capacity building.

Because these levels may be dissimilar, the linker needs to use appropriate approaches to work with varieties of individuals and groups.

A site must have reached a certain level of readiness for change in order to progress with a planned instructional improvement effort. The linker, along with site staff, needs to diagnose those elements needed by the site as a prerequisite for effective program planning. It is imperative for the linker to start work with a staff (or group) at a level consistent with their needs and readiness; NRC experiences have shown that the assumption that a problem can be isolated, a solution selected, implemented and evaluated in less than two years is unrealistic for some sites. At other sites, the Project cycle may not mesh with the district planning/budget cycle, making assessment of readiness for change activities at both the site and the district level critical for linkers.

CONDITIONS IMPOSED ON LINKER BY PROJECT STRUCTURE

Proposal and Contract

As an action research project which is developmental over a limited period of time, certain constraints are imposed by the contractual arrangements which provide the direction for project activities. Those have a decided impact on the responsibilities, expectations and activities of the linkers, as does any contract with any individual. Thus, a linker unaware of the contract parameters is a linker heading for difficulties.

A dissemination project which is restrictive as to content area has limitations from the linker's perspective. Problem areas in schools often overlap subject matter areas so that a solution may cut across several disciplines. While a content limitation may make sense from a project management/research view, a site or linker may find it to be unduly arbitrary at times. Although this arbitrary compartmentalization is feasible for research purposes, linkage processes addressing the broader "learning problem needs" of the students may be more realistic from some points of view.

The model of the NRC Project is based upon implicit assumptions regarding a planning cycle. These assumptions may have been over simplistic and more ambitious than is realistic for many of the sites assigned to the linker.

Limitations of the project may emerge as an important factor to the linker and the school staff. The narrowing of content focus has definite implications in terms of the linker role and for precise identification of project sponsored and supported achievements.

Linker Placement

The placement of the linker in an intermediate agency and the relationship of this agency to the project are important considerations. Ideally, a sub-

contractor or host which houses a linker should be in the "mainstream" of public education both geographically and politically. This is an important consideration if the linker is to have access to a wide array of human, material and informational resources. Such an organization should have demonstrated prior capability to operate as a supportive, nonthreatening, service oriented agency whose major concern is improvement of education. A linker housed by this type of agency may be expected to assume many of the agency's organizational, social and political characteristics. The linker will need to clarify the linkage role within the sponsoring agency's structure in relation to project requirements identified in contractual agreements and project commitments.

Linker Task Assignment

The various "linker roles" as they relate to the host agency, the project, the school district and the local site need to be understood and agreed upon by all those sharing responsibilities and/or receiving services. Before contracts with sites are initiated, the linker needs to go through a process of clarifying role perceptions, personal values and expectations. The linker job does not have a standard definition and the nature of the position is one toward which various individuals are likely to hold widely divergent expectations. The linker's self-concept becomes very important.

The linker's job description is identified in a subcontract of the NRC Project. This description outlines basic Project expectations and provides the basis for continuing professional development within the scope of Project planning activities. However, by its very structure, the NRC chose four different subcontractors to house its linkers, and each subcontractor (ESDs, regional resource service agency and a state agency) viewed their linker differently. The relationship of the linker to the host agency has many

implications for linker effectiveness. The client's perception of the linker may be affected by the subcontract's placement of the linker and the way the linker relates to this placement. Further study of these relationships need to be considered.

Local School Relationships

A school district seeking services of a linkage system should prepare a letter of commitment reflecting an understanding of what the Project and the linker is to do. These letters, ideally prepared jointly by the district and the linker, should address such items as depth of commitment, degree of advocacy and fiscal and personnel resources available to support linkage activities. Commitments related to time, i.e., released time for staff development, composition of the task force and the length of time the district intends to participate actively are vital elements to be clarified before linkage processes are initiated.

Selection of key individuals to participate in the preparation of the agreement is an area worthy of consideration. In situations where the linker is expected to work closely with a school principal as well as district office personnel it may be crucial that the principal be included in the agreement process.

ESTABLISHING LINKAGE RELATIONSHIPS

Site Selection and Entry

Site selection is highly related to success in program planning. As stated earlier, a site must have a certain level of readiness for change in order to progress with a planned instructional improvement effort. If adopting a program in a limited time frame is a factor, and if administration and staff are not in agreement that an instructional problem does exist which may necessitate change, another site should be selected. One of the common problems faced by linkers in this Project is that initial sites were assigned to linkers with limited consideration of readiness factors. In any case, the linker, along with site staff, needs to diagnose those things needed by the site as a prerequisite for effective program planning.

Orientation should be carried out at two levels. The first is the administrative level. Philosophy, scope, sequence, staff time, budgetary considerations, community involvement, etc., must be clearly understood prior to initiating instructional planning activities with teachers. The Project administrator or the linker's immediate superior may be important in this orientation. A clear understanding of the limits within which the linker will operate needs to be reached at the beginning of the intervention.

The second level of orientation is with site staff. This is likely to be primarily the job of the linker. Meeting with the site administrator prior to meeting with the staff or task force is crucial. It is here that the linker can begin diagnosis of the site in such areas as school climate, readiness for change, awareness of power structure and clarification of role expectancies. Upon meeting with the site staff, the linker should reinforce the image of being supportive, service oriented and nonthreatening. The linker should be

able to explain the Project purpose, scope and direction in relation to the school district's/school site's philosophy, goals and limits as identified during previous planning with district administrators and building principal.

Relationship to Higher Education

To date there has been a passive acceptance by higher education that NRC exists as an agency for instructional improvement. It is one linker's opinion that, possibly, higher education may need the support of the NRC more than vice versa at this time. Sites need expertise in the field and very few higher education reading experts are involved in on-site experiences. Linkers can assist higher education by making faculty aware of local school needs and encouraging them to develop knowledge, skills and abilities to meet these needs in practical ways at site locations. To meet needs of schools, inservice offerings must be developed which are flexible. off campus, long term and geared to solving onsite problems.

The linker may perform an important role as an "inservice broker." Linkers have found that although no one campus houses all the expertise needed to solve an onsite problem, some human and material resources may be very appropriate.

The linker can assume responsibility for coordinating all needed talent, both on and off campus, to zero in on a site problem. Also, if staff wishes or needs college credit, this relationship can lead to an enhanced ongoing utilization of higher education offerings.

Relationship to a Knowledge Base

Two divergent points of view exist regarding the relationship of the linker to the knowledge base of R&D outcomes. One group maintains that the linker needs only to know "where" the R&D information is and how to get it to the decision making group. The other group emphasizes the need for the linker to have a working knowledge of the products contained in R&D outcomes.

Information regarding products is necessary. The question is: "To what extent should the linker be expected to have it personally?"

At the present time in the NRC the linker's knowledge about R&D outcomes is centered on the materials in the Knowledge Base Handbook. An indepth study of products or processes has not been more than a marginal part of linker training. One opinion is that the linker needs more knowledge about R&D outcomes than s/he possesses to date. As task forces are guided through activities leading to selection, the linker is often asked, What about this one?" "How does program X differ from Y?" "Where is the closest school using program K?" Task force members asking these types of onsite questions may expect an immediate answer from the linker.

Relationship to Right to Read

In addition to having a working relationship with a knowledge base, a linker may find cooperative arrangements with other programs or groups to be an important aspect of developing a team approach in assisting schools.

The Project in its original design was to "interface" with the state R_2R program. In most states involved with the Project, the interface has not yet realized its full potential. Site selection criteria may have impeded the process of integrating NRC activities with R_2R activities at the local site level as most sites selected for inclusion in the Project were established R_2R sites. Needs assessment activities had been initiated, completed, modified or abandoned a year or more prior to the NRC's entry into the school district. Merging with the district's planning cycle was not always easy, even though recognized as an important integration. Several districts declined to "re-do" an R_2R assessment even when the linker believed that more thorough planning was needed. An informal update on the previous assessment often was the compromise.

A much needed, more realistic, test of the NRC model's complete planning cycle would mean the involvement of a site just initiating the use of the current R_2R assessment procedures. Integration of Project activities with R_2R might be ideal if the state R_2R staff could assume the responsibility to see that the site received all resources necessary to complete the R_2R assessment. The linker could then work closely with both R_2R staff and the site task force through the completion of the assessment phase. With these activities completed, the linker could then guide the task force and/or staff through appropriate check point activities (program improvement steps) related to selection, implementation and installation.

ASSISTING SITES IN IDENTIFYING PROBLEM AREAS

The primary focus of activities related to the program improvement process is the assessment of the existing reading program in the school in terms of "where we are" compared to "where we ought/would like to be."

Establishing a Task Force

The linker may need to help the school form a working group (the task force) for the process if this was not done prior to this time. Setting up and maintaining two-way communication channels with total staff and with building and district administration is essential. The needs assessment process—the gathering and analyzing of data—is complex and time consuming. Teacher released time for planning and involvement is essential, as are regularly scheduled meetings to check progress.

Scheduling Activities

A plan of operation and time line need to be established and responsibilities assigned. The linker needs to make an assessment of the task force skills and provide assistance or training in communication skills, problem solving skills and, perhaps, technical skills in the use of the R_2R model of assessment and planning. The linker should start work with a building staff or group at the level of their needs. Some groups will need help in group interaction skills before they are ready to tackle group decision making on instructional issues. The role of the linker during this phase varies from one of leadership, instruction and continuous involvement to that of observer and facilitator, depending on the level of expertise of the task force.

Improving Communication and Problem Identification

As the task force gathers and analyzes data, communication between this group and the total staff becomes essential. The target population for change

is identified at this point and should be drawn into the decision making process if not already represented. According to Lippitt, Watson and Westley, "Both the formal and the informal organization of an institution must be considered in planning any process of change." The concerns or problems addressed must be prioritized and criteria for making selections should be clearly established. Each school has goals, constraints and interests which must be reflected in these selection criteria.

As a knowledgeable outsider not representing or allied to internal biases or power groups, much of the activity of the linker may serve to assist individuals and groups in clarifying needs in relation to values. A common problem during this phase of the process is that clients may confuse "solutions" with "needs." Schools, or individuals, may have entered the project with a particular program change in mind. The linker needs to draw on communication and problem solving skills to help the task force move to clarification procedures which describe the actual areas of shared concerns to be addressed. Helping the group describe the "whys" of the goal they may have entered with can often move them to an actual description of a problem without making them feel they are being told their goal is unacceptable.

The importance of keeping written records of happenings and decisions and distributing them to key people in the school, community and district cannot be overemphasized. Such records provide evidence of progress to the group, prevent misinterpretation of decisions and provide a means of communicating to essential others not directly involved in the actions of the task force.

Building a sense of "ownership" in the change process starts at this first step in the process. Making clear that the linker is not going to influence the nature of the problem statement or future selection of an innovation is crucial. The linker will need to provide opportunities for negotiation if various

groups have identified conflicting goals during the problem identification phase. Key district administrators, for example, may have identified a particular goal for the school that differs from the needs identified by teaching staff. Conflict of direction will impact on the selection process and should be identified and resolved at the problem statement phase. The linker, as outside facilitator, can serve as mediator in this type of negotiation.

USE OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE

The Knowledge Base has had two levels of use, each of which has served as an important function in the improvement efforts of the local schools. A brief description of each level, as well as discussion of procedures utilized when the LEA rejects all of the programs contained in the Knowledge Base follows.

First Level Use

A book of program descriptions and research summaries has been developed and distributed to each linker. At the time the LEA problem has been identified and a decision made as to a general direction to go with the improvement effort, the program descriptions are reviewed to determine whether any Knowledge Base programs seem to have potential for addressing the prioritized needs. The methods used for this activity have varied among the linkers. At times all the description sheets have been shared with task force members and a group decision reached as to which ones to pursue further. In other instances the linker has served as an initial screener and has shared only the descriptions which were thought to have potential for addressing the defined problem. In yet another approach the linker requested second level materials for all programs determined by the linker to have potential for that LEA.

The research summaries provided in the Knowledge Base have served primarily as background for the linkers. It has made considerable research information available without requiring an overly burdensome time commitment.

Second Level Use

Following a review of the program descriptions, task forces generally decided to investigate several programs further. The linker then submitted a request for the packet of materials for each program in which the task force

had expressed an interest. The materials were reviewed by the group and some type of action decision made. Following this review the packets of materials were returned to NWREL.

Special Searches

There have been several instances when LEA task forces have rejected all of the programs reviewed and have requested further searching for programs or materials more appropriate for their school. These requests have basically followed two patterns. The most common has been a general request to seek other programs designed to address a particular problem. A second approach has been to request NWREL to investigate one or more specific programs about which task force members have already heard.

A serious time problem has plagued the special search effort from the beginning. The Northwest Reading Consortium Project established a set of criteria which had to be met by any program which would be incorporated into the Knowledge Base. Locating developers, obtaining materials and convening a reading review panel has been a time consuming effort. Meanwhile, LEA task force members have been ready to make decisions and have been frustrated by the time lag between their request for further searching and delivery of additional programs.

Use of Consultants and Technical Assistance

The Northwest Reading Consortium Project was written to involve a variety of groups and individuals as resources as well as research and development products, with particular attention focused on colleges and universities. It was assumed that local schools would benefit from opportunities to work with reading educators from higher education and would desire to do so.

In actual practice there has been much less interest on the part of the local school people to work with college or university people than had been

anticipated. What has occurred has been a consistent pattern of making use of program developers or users of programs as consultants instead. The requests for consultant assistance have been related more to adoption and implementation than to assessment or selection activities. While the project has received some criticism for this, it must be noted that the project was designed to maintain those kinds of decisions as LEA prerogatives. Their choice has been, generally, to request program people as consultants.

There have been instances of college people who have served as consultants and in some cases have been viewed as very successful. This is an area that needs further study, however, if local school people and higher education people are going to get closer together in the efforts to improve reading instruction.

ASSISTING SITES IN SELECTING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

The Process

The primary people involved in the R&D matching and selection process have included the site principal, teachers impacted by the selected innovation, community members, central office personnel, other administrators and the linker. As in all previous phases, it proved to be vital that appropriate individuals be involved in decision making. A sense of ownership, commitment and support for the proposed solution are critical factors in successful change efforts and these did not and will not occur without appropriate involvement. Although matching and selection of an R&D outcome is the first step toward adoption/adaption of a solution or innovation, the previous orientation and problem assessment creates the climate in which solution selection occurs. (We found it crucial that site entry orientation and assessment were successfully completed if solution matching/selection is to be successful.)

Before the matching/selection process may begin, several key issues should have been discussed by the task force. These include:

1. What are the procedures used for changing curriculum in this site/district?
2. Who has control of curriculum changes in the site/district?
3. Who needs to be involved in solution selection? Who are the key decision makers? How and when should these people be involved? How will other appropriate people know what is being planned/decided?
4. What are the attitudes and value perspectives of the target group?
5. What is the site/district philosophy?
6. What are the community values?

7. How can credibility be built for a program which may be in conflict with district and/or community philosophy or values?
8. What are the specific site needs (in terms of needs not solutions)?
9. What fiscal resources may be available? If no fiscal resources are available, what "trade-offs" may have to be made to financially support a new program?
10. How may changes in administrative role relationships/responsibilities affect those involved?
11. What long range (site/district) goals/objectives may be affected by a new program/program changes?
12. How can staff awareness be built without being threatening?
13. Which of the selection criteria should be the most influential in R&D outcome selection?
14. What other programs/activities are most likely to be affected by a new program and/or program changes?

The answers to these questions along with the criteria for selection will form the total basis upon which individual R&D outcomes will be evaluated and one program eventually selected and implemented.

Since the steps in the matching/selection phase have already been outlined in the previous section, they are not repeated here. However, one additional aspect not previously mentioned is that it is important for the linker to note whether or not the group involved in developing the recommendations of the R&D outcome to be selected is the same group which will be using it. It it is not the same group, ownership for the selection may not be transferred to the group implementing the selected program.

During R&D outcome selection, the task force has the responsibility of generating acceptance for the selected program. This task is important for successful implementation of the program.

THE ROLE OF THE LINKER

The role of the linker is one of constant change and development. The linker gains entry into a site by building a working relationship with the site personnel. The linker then becomes a catalyst to cause change, i.e., a process facilitator. However, at the time of solution/selection the role of the linker expands even further. The linker now also becomes an assessor of potential solutions and an R&D specialist. The linker must have a general knowledge of R&D beyond the scope of the Northwest Reading Consortium knowledge base. Perhaps it is impossible for the linker to be an expert on all available R&D outcomes (i.e., Educational Programs That Work, other knowledge bases, ERIC, etc.), and where further data on each individual program is available. In other words, the linker must be able to answer promptly questions generated by the task force. Frequently, the program description sheets do not give the linker or task force enough information to guide them toward selection or rejection of the program. Therefore, it seems reasonable that the linker be trained in R&D program knowledge, if s/he is to assist the task force in effective program selection.

The linker must also have a knowledge of reading process skills. In a sense, a linker needs to be a reading specialist. All four of the NRC Project linkers were reading specialists before becoming linkers. While this may have been an asset for the NRC Project with its singular focus, experience indicates that for an effort directed at a broader range of issues, curriculum development specialists would be better as linkers than content area specialists. During R&D matching/selection, the linker is involved in decision making and planning. It is realistic to expect the linker to have knowledge of budgetary skills, mechanics of dissemination, group dynamics, as well as knowledge of R&D products

and reading skills. If the linker does not have these skills, additional "training" will be required. To further gain credibility, the linker must remain non-partisan during R&D matching/selection. In a sense, the linker must be an educational agnostic. The linker may lead the task force to make appropriate decisions based upon research and/or their selection criteria; however, the linker should avoid recommending or strongly supporting a personal favorite. The decision must be made by those who will actually implement the program if it is to have a high probability for success.

The Northwest Reading Consortium Project has identified several linker objectives for the matching/selection phase. They are:

- Assist LEAs in applying group decision making techniques to reach consensus on solutions to problems
- Assist LEAs in reviewing alternative solutions in terms of established criteria
- Assist LEAs in "matching" available R&D outcomes to identify local needs for reading improvement
- Identify unresolved problems and conduct searches when a "match" is not achieved by initial data base

PLANNING PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Linker involvement at the level of instructional program implementation seems to focus mainly on three principal groups: The teachers comprising the target population, other staff members who need to be informed and the principal. The role which parent members of the needs assessment group play in actual implementation is usually unclear both to them and the staff. Many parents feel that once their input is shared during the needs assessment, the rest of the planning and decision making is up to the teachers. Depending on the nature of the innovation, parent members of the task force may become involved in activities such as tutoring. They should also be kept informed as the program progresses.

In this phase, the teacher advocates for instructional change and will look to the principal for some degree of guidance in the formation of an implementation plan. It is crucial, therefore, that the principal become a participating member of the planning committee. It becomes a linker responsibility to see that this happens and is important for two reasons. First, teachers will look to the principal to provide leadership as he is the administrative head of the building. Program changes are difficult to accomplish or maintain if the principal doesn't support them. The principal also must approve the overall plan and thus have intimate knowledge of it. Secondly, the linker-principal relationship will become increasingly a crucial factor in the eventual success of the planned program and both parties need to become thoroughly familiar with the details specified in the plan. As the plan develops and the linker gains understanding of the process at work, ability to respond to both identified and as yet unidentified needs within it will depend, to a large extent, on the communication established between the principal and the linker. Time, distance and teaching responsibilities make it impractical for the

linker to get teachers to respond to every detail or question that might arise. The principal is the logical respondent.

During implementation planning questions of responsibility must be resolved. Teachers sometimes say they simply don't have the time or that much of the planning requires administrative attention. The principal may be too busy or may not have sufficient information to do it or may disagree with the philosophy of multi-lateral planning.

If the linker writes the plan, the staff may not feel committed to do it. Furthermore, they may have difficulty understanding their role in putting it into effect, and little or nothing will be accomplished to develop the capacity to plan within the site. Therefore, linkers believe it is the prime responsibility of the task force to develop the implementation plan.

In designing the plan, each person or group can make a valuable contribution. The principal can provide leadership and support to the staff. The linker can contribute planning expertise, including model plans, and provide pertinent information on the selected innovation. The teachers can best communicate what is needed to make it work within the classroom.

The idea of staff planning is difficult for many teachers. Some declare they are not "curriculum experts" while others say they don't have the time. Both may be true, but if such objections are allowed to stand, they can stifle the best of planning efforts. The reality of joint planning can offset the first fear. By "joint" we mean that all parties, especially the principal, participate as equals in the planning venture. Decisions reached by the group should not be subject to unilateral interruption by another administrator since this would scuttle the group decision making process.

The obstacle of insufficient time is not easily handled. Most teachers object to excessive interruption in their classroom routine, even if release

time is provided for planning. Compounding the problem, plans must be made for the substitute teacher to follow and this cuts even deeper into the regular teacher's time. Some release time is necessary, but the quantity of this time is not as important as the quality.

On the other hand, planning meetings after school on teacher's "tired time" can easily become a chore, especially if teachers are not committed to the planning effort.

The key to the situation is to identify teachers who feel that their involvement will make a difference, who feel the administration and other teachers support them and that they have the power to make a positive difference. Regular meetings that result in the exchange of ideas among staff, parents and administrators will further support the change process. In this respect, time is not as critical as the need for the opportunity to plan.

The linker's involvement in implementation planning seems to be two-dimensional, the first being that the linker needs to document that certain critical points have been passed. If critical points are turned into a series of questions these check points, or objectives, can become the basis of, and will result in, an implementation planning product. Perhaps some of the more crucial check points are the following:

1. Has the target population (staff) been identified?
2. Is an implementation plan drafted? If so, how does it address each of the following issues?
    a. Objectives
    b. Activities
    c. Time line
    d. Evaluation
    e. Approval procedures

f. Integration

g. Training

3. Who has the responsibility for carrying out the plan? Is the innovation an adoption or an adaption? In whole or part?

A second dimension of the linker's involvement with the implementation planning phase concerns role perceptions based, more or less, on how the linker feels about the events described in dimension one. Wheras dimension one can be characterized as objective (recording of certain key events), linker activities in dimension two will be based on more subjective measures. Many of these will relate to observations and perceptions concerning those key activities. In this sense, the product is part of the process. If the linker is to be the catalyst in the entire planning/implementation effort, then it becomes essential to assume that role. Again, a series of questions could be formulated to describe the implementation planning process and implications for the linker role.

1. Does the staff have the necessary competence to implement a solution with a reasonable amount of inservice? Is the selected solution consistent with their needs?
2. Is the implementation plan adequate? If not, what can be done to improve it?
3. Are the target population teachers a different group than the needs assessment teachers? If so , what has been done to involve them in the implementation planning?
4. What lines of communication need strengthening? How informed is the rest of the staff about the events in progress? What is the communication pattern between the linker and the principal, between the principal and the planning group?

5. If consultants are needed for inservice, what are the sources available for locating and contacting such individuals?
6. How familiar is the linker with the solution selected? What knowledge of the innovation would prove most useful to the school?
7. What arrangements has the linker made to assist the site with the development of the implementation plan?
8. What can be done to assure that the decision makers are present at the implementation planning meeting?
9. What are the unmet needs and what can be done about them?
10. What conflicts need resolution?

Implementation planning is perhaps the most crucial step in the adoption/adaption of a solution or innovation. The mechanics cannot be left to chance. Too often, program adoptions become failures because of inadequate attention to this step. (No one may want to do the work of developing the plan. Decision makers may not know how to plan.) They may have difficulty putting the completed plan into operation, or simply may not want to risk implementing something they played little part in selecting or believe to be ill-conceived. Staff may not know what questions to ask nor how to seek answers. If implementation plans are developed just before the end of school, teachers and administrators may not be able to think through their ideas carefully before they are rushed to close for the summer.

Implementation planning should be a dynamic process. What goes in will directly affect the outcomes. To a frustrated staff it can be hard work. Often they find themselves going in circles as a result of their planning efforts. They may not know how to plan effectively as a group. Often, as an internal planning group, they are not prepared to handle the emotional and communication

problems which may arise. In addition, internal leadership may be difficult to establish and maintain. Worse yet, it may not develop at all.

The linker, working as an inside/outside person, can help the group avoid unnecessary problems. The linker can provide model plans for review which relieve some of the frustrations experienced by staff members as they attempt to resolve the complex issues associated with the implementation process. If implementation plans appear to be imprecise, the linker can help focus them. If implementation involves others not involved in the original planning the linker can identify this concern and assist the staff to bring others into the effort.

Implementation planning needs careful attention if planning efforts are to reach the installation and institutionalization stages. All too often, no one within the system will or can devote sufficient time, energy or expertise to see that implementation issues are addressed. By attending to both product and process considerations the linker can play a pivotal role in assisting the site through this phase.

APPENDIX A

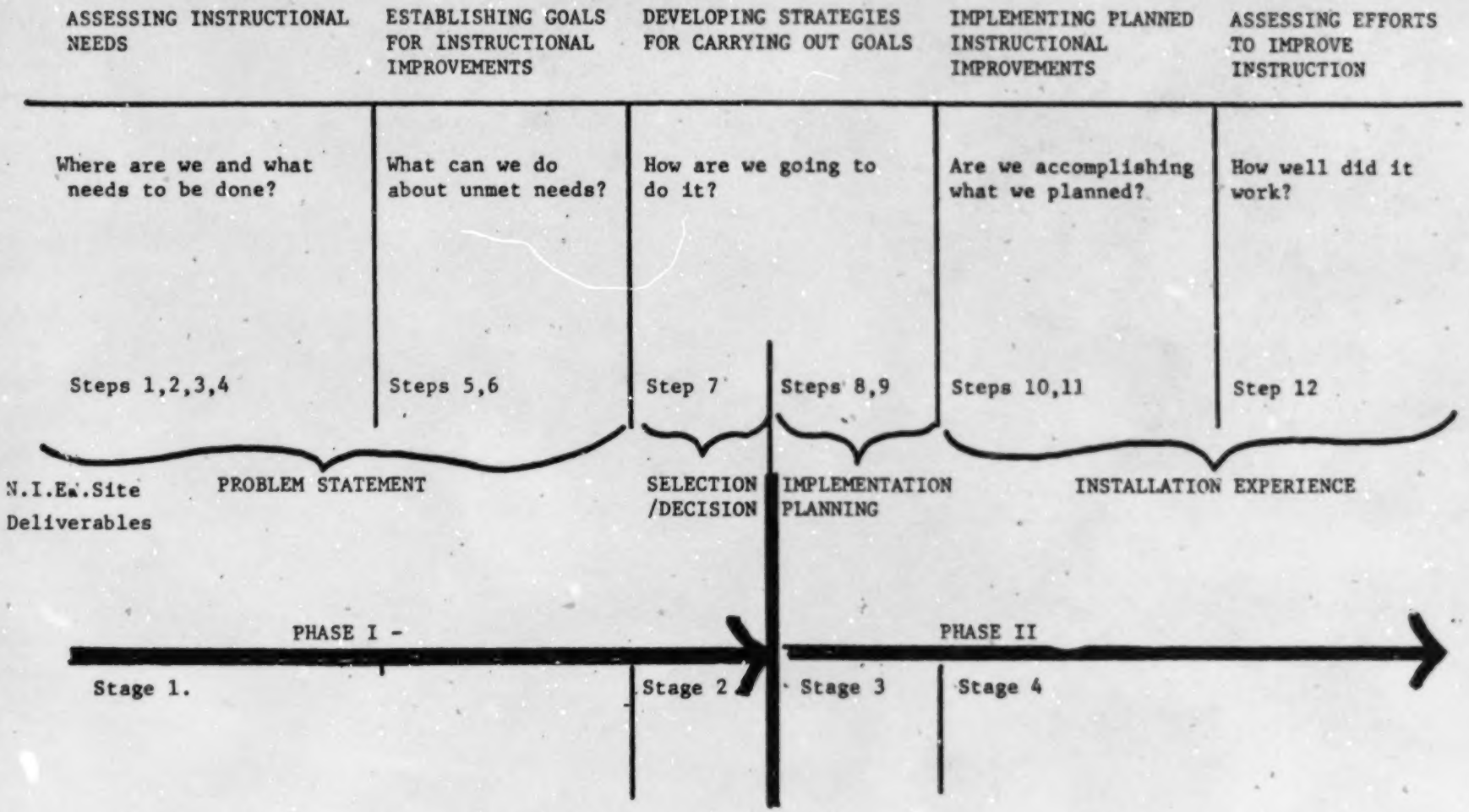
Basic Instructional Planning Process

As Related To Site Case Studies

Northwest Reading Consortium

BASIC INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING PROCESS AS RELATED TO SITE CASE STUDIES

NORTHWEST READING CONSORTIUM



Revision 2/7/78

APPENDIX B

Knowledge Base Development

Knowledge Base Development

Three general divisions comprise the collection defined as the Knowledge Base. These divisions include descriptions of reading programs, criteria for including or excluding materials, and the research related to reading instruction. The development of each of these areas will be described in this report in order that the total effort required for providing R&D outcomes will be reflected.

Reading Programs. Needs which had been identified and which served as the guides for the intitial searches included problems with comprehension, individualization, early assessment, content area reading instruction, and developmental reading. Although these identified areas encompassed programs serving students from preschool through senior high school, the majority of the programs actually collected were designed for elementary school populations. Approximately four months were utilized in the initial effort with an end result that thirty reading programs were identified and processed for inclusion in the Knowledge Base. Although many more than thirty had been investigated, some had been rejected, reviews for several had been postponed, and additional information was being sought for others.

In addition to the needs cited above which had been determined at the time the project proposal was written, other areas of concern surfaced as a result of state assemblies[1], informal discussions with project personnel, telephone calls, and problem statements generated at local schools. Memoranda from the project director to NWREL also aided in the establishment of priorities in terms of other program investigations.

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[1] State assemblies were meetings including project management, higher education representatives, local school persons including teachers and administrators, the project linker for that state, and the NWREL subcontract manager. Persons in attendance at these meetings numbered as high as 50.

Needs which had been identified and which served as the guides for the subsequent searches included programs for the able and gifted student, language arts integrated programs, other communication programs such as spelling and writing, and an increased emphasis on programs targeted to secondary students. These priority areas, along with those identified intially, served as the basis for program searching throughout the life of the project.

There were five basic sources utilized in the early searches for reading programs. These included ERIC, the NIE catalog, the NDN catalog, labs and centers, and the state R2R directors from Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. In addition to these formal sources which have been used throughout the life of the project, other programs having potential for inclusion in the Knowledge Base have been identified via more informal methods. Generally, this has been the result of a teacher hearing about a particular program from another teacher and then requesting that it be investigated. These kinds of requests have been forwarded to NWREL by the linkers and in each case the programs were reviewed for possible inclusion in the Knowledge Base.

One other major search for successful programs is worth noting. In January, 1978, a letter was sent to the R2R director of each state as well as the trust territories requesting that each recommend reading programs which were believed to have potential for inclusion in the Knowledge Base. One hundred forty programs were identified in this manner. While several were duplicates of programs already reviewed, most were new and provided a rich source to investigate.

At the time this report was being prepared, 81 programs had been formally reviewed by a reading panel and 59 had been selected for inclusion in the Knowledge Base. Others had been screened out prior to a review panel because necessary information was not available. Evaluation data which demonstrated

the level of student success as a result of the project intervention was often times what was unavailable.

Research Summaries. In addition to seeking research and development products which were actual reading programs, the proposal developers and project leadership were very interested in providing research findings to local schools. It was decided that it would be an advantage if the research information were summarized by a person with recognized expertise in the field of reading and the summaries then provided to each linker.

Dr. Ruth Waugh, University of Oregon, was contracted to do this work. Based on a review of research publications, doctoral dissertations, and other professional journals, Dr. Waugh wrote six research summaries which were: 1) Choosing a Textbook to Improve Student Comprehension, 2) CLOZE Procedure--"Matching Books to Students," 3) How to Be an Effective Teacher, 4) Organizers for Comprehension, 5) Syllabication, and 6) Teaching Students to Comprehend.

Two other research documents have been provided the linkers which are worthy of note. One[2] was a synthesis of research in basic skills and the other[3] was a research based response to typical questions asked by teachers of reading.

Even with the use of summaries, syntheses, and responses to specific questions, some concern has been expressed that the research information was difficult to use with LEA task force persons. It was acknowledged, however, that the summaries written by Dr. Waugh were valuable and useful as a part of the Knowledge Base.

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[2]Gow, Doris T., A Synthesis of Research in Basic Skills, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, May 1977.

[3]Weaver, Phyllis A. with Harriet Doss Willis and Fredi Sharhoff, Research Within Reach: A Research-Guided Response to Concerns of Reading Educators, CEMREL, Inc., 1977.

Knowledge Base Program Selection Criteria. An early decision of the NRC Project was to establish specific criteria for screening and selecting programs for the Knowledge Base. Even though many of the reading programs had been validated by a state or national review process, it was felt that a consistent set of criteria for this project would, over time, prove beneficial. The state assemblies decribed earlier in this report provided an excellent source of input for the development of program selection criteria.

Two levels of review have been used throughout the tenure of the project. The first has been a check by NWREL personnel to determine that all necessary information about a program has been collected. If essential information were not available, the program in question was eliminated from further consideration. The second level has been a review panel comprised of the NRC Director, the NWREL subcontract manager, the R2R Director for the state in which the panel convened, a teacher, a representative from higher education, and the linker from the host state. This review group, using the rating scale developed for the project, systematically evaluated each program to determine whether or not it would be part of the Knowledge Base and its use; minimum score requirements by section and an overall minimum score are described on the instrument.

Knowledge Base Content

The previous discussions have dealt with the methods by which programs were selected for or rejected from inclusion in the Knowledge Base. This section will describe the content of the Knowledge Base in terms of types of programs which are included and the levels served by the programs.

Program Types. Many of the reading programs contained in the Knowledge Base were originally developed with Title I or Title III, ESEA funds, or through the more recent Title IV-C funds. As such, the programs are generally value based, audience specific types with most targeted to educationally and/or economically deprived children. This means that the programs included in the Knowledge Base are not total reading programs at all but rather, have been supplementary to other instructional activity of a school.

Attempts to identify successful reading programs which were not developed with federal funds and which are total reading programs as opposed to supplementary ones have proved to be rather successful. Schools typically have not had funds for disseminating successful practices nor have they had evaluation designs which yielded the data needed for program validation. Lastly, very few of these kinds of programs have been replicated elsewhere. This has posed a serious problem in the effort to develop a Knowledge Base that was totally responsive to the needs of the linkers and the schools each served. Developmental programs and many others which appeared to be very good, simply could not be included in the Knowledge Base. Of course, it must be stated that this also served as a protection in that hard evidence of success had to be provided and, consequently, persons using the Knowledge Base were assured that any program included had met the inclusion criteria.

Program Levels. As has been mentioned earlier, the programs in the Knowledge Base address students from preschool through senior high school. The vast majority, however, are really designed for elementary school children. Of the 59 programs currently comprising the Knowledge Base, only 14 are really designed for secondary students. Admittedly, there are others which indicate a suitability or appropriateness for junior high or senior high